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Gundersen MedLink tests winds on whether to buy second chopper

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Hill



Tribune file photo

Gundersen MedLink AIR, which owns this helicopter, landing on the helipad of Gundersen Health System's main hospital is leasing another one during a six-month trial to decide whether to buy a second chopper.

Gundersen Health System in La Crosse will add a second helicopter to its emergency flight service today, deploying the choppers to corners of its coverage area, according to its director.

"The volumes are increasing, with increases in requests and increases in turn-downs," said Stephanie Hill, program director of Gundersen MedLink AIR.

"Because of our high demand, we aren't always able to respond when a request for a transport comes in. Adding the second helicopter will allow us to better respond to the needs in our communities," Hill said of Gundersen facilities serving 19 counties in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa, with flights extending farther, to a 150-mile radius from La Crosse.

MedLink, which was launched in 1992, has reached volumes of 500 completed runs a year amid 1,000 requests, including not only responses to crashes and other emergencies but also transfers to other facilities, Hill said.

Some requests are declined because of weather, but others result from the fact that MedLink has just one helicopter, based at its main La Crosse campus, she said.

Gundersen officials mulled the move for four years before settling on the six-month trial period starting today with a leased helicopter, Hill said.

During that time, one helicopter will be based at the Sparta/Fort McCoy Airport in Sparta and one at the Decorah (Iowa) Municipal Airport from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily. Both will return to their home hangar in La Crosse from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m., with just one helicopter in service overnight, Hill said.

Opting for those schedules was "a very strategic decision ... to provide equal service and meet the most requests," she said.

Just 5 percent of MedLink flights now are from Gundersen in La Crosse, generally involving transfers for transplants or burns. Between 80 percent and 90 percent are incoming from crash sites or other facilities or involve relocating patients, such as a flight

from Prairie du Chien to Madison, for example, she said.

“Having our aircraft based outside La Crosse ... will give us greater reach and allow us to handle a greater volume of flights from our regional hospitals and accident scenes,” she said.

“In most cases, it will also shorten transport time, especially from some of our remote locations. This should result in better patient outcomes for time-critical emergencies such as stroke and heart attack,” Hill said.

The existing medical flight crews, including nurses and paramedics, will staff the choppers during the trial period, Hill said.

MedLink has not sought bids on buying a new helicopter, but one like the EC-145 it has now could cost about \$7 million, she said.

Factors that officials will begin analyzing about halfway through the trial include the numbers of flights, their originating points, the tally of declined flights, response times and patient outcomes “to see if it is feasible,” Hill said.

“The outcomes will be the most important,” she said.

Mike Tighe

Mike Tighe is the Tribune newsroom's senior citizen. That said, he don't get no respect from the cub reporters as he goes about his duly-appointed rounds on the health, religion and whatever-else-lands-in-his-inbox beats. Call him at 608-791-8446.

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